



City Currents

Winter 2016





As I put my thoughts to paper, we are quickly approaching the end of the year. This is the time when the majority of the world pauses a moment to look back on the past and take inventory of events. One can say that the beginning of this term with a new City Council has been somewhat tumultuous; however, I would rather take account of the positive things that have transpired over the last few months.

- City Council has workshoped and set their annual goals.
- The City and the Friends of West U Parks conducted yet another successful Fathers & Flashlights campout with over 505 children and 250 dads participating, which raised over \$81,000 for our parks.
- The West U PTO's third annual "West U Elementary Dash — 5K and Kids Fun Run," which is always a community favorite, had over 1,006 runners participating this year.
- The West U Parks "Movies in the Parks" series was another wonderful attribute of our community.
- The Tree Trust Program was kicked off for another year in our 25+ years as a Tree City USA.
- Council selected a new prosecutor since our long-term Presiding Judge Candelaria Elizondo has retired; Associate Judge Robert Loper now begins his term as Presiding Judge.
- The Friends of West U Parks and City Council continue to collaborate on improvements to the west end of Colonial Park, working to ensure more enjoyment of the green space by providing a yearlong venue — all while preserving the majestic oaks we treasure.
- City staff has weathered the recent period of uncertainty; now stabilized, staff will continue to provide the highest and most cost-efficient delivery of services to our taxpayers.
- City Council studied the issues and held public hearings on the tax rate, the budget and the fee schedule for the upcoming budget year. The tax rate has been lowered a full \$.03. It provides our taxpayers one of the lowest tax rates in Harris County while still maintaining our stable pay-as-you-go policy for replacement of equipment, vehicles and technological solutions. It also provides market salaries and benefits in a region that is experiencing double-digit cost increases on these line items.
- Council has approved the proposal to enhance solid waste services: beginning in 2016, we will pick up bulk trash at residents' curbs and begin recycling green waste.
- The West U Police Department has made numerous arrests relative to recent property crimes and is in a high state of alert.
- The West U Fire Department, in conjunction with our Public Works Department, has provided our residents with the highest possible ISO (Insurance Services Office) rating, which results in lowering the insurance rates paid by our property owners by approximately \$20 per month. Only 60 cities nationwide and 18 cities in Texas have achieved this stellar rating out of approximately 48,000 communities rated nationwide.
- City Administration and the Finance Department are moving forward to take advantage of our highest bond rating to refinance our bonds, yielding an annual saving of over \$20,000.
- Our IT and communications personnel continue to improve our communication and information offerings to the community.
- The Public Works and Finance Departments are finishing the Automatic Meter Reading program, which is resulting in cost savings and enhanced accuracy for our water customers.

In summary, I see a lot of positives here and now, and continuing for our future. West U is and continues to be a wonderful community with recognized financial stability, excellent services and responsive public safety officers, resulting in outstanding retention/enhancement of property values.

I hope that you and yours experienced a safe and enjoyable holiday season and look forward to our many delightful future events. See you at the Houston Marathon in January.

From Council Member Brennan Reilly

Residents Deserve to Know the Reasons for Property Tax Increases

The City Council recently approved the City's budget for 2016. Like the budgets adopted for seven of the last eight years, this budget includes an effective property tax increase. An "effective tax rate increase" means that even though the tax rate is going down by three cents per \$100 of valuation, it is not going down enough to offset the rise in the valuation of properties in the City. Another way to say this is: if your taxable property value goes up 10% while the City tax rate drops 6%, your overall City property taxes still go up by 4%.

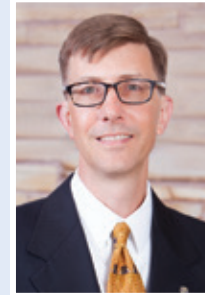
The budgeted increase for 2016 is relatively small, 3.97% in total, of which about one-third is attributable to new construction. If you have an existing home, this means that your property taxes will be going up less than 3% on average. But these small increases add up over time. From 2009 through 2016, budgeted effective property tax increases total more than 33%. Disregarding the value of new construction, these increases total more than 24% over the same period. These are averages, so your property taxes may have gone up more or less, depending on relative increases in your home value. In my case, my annual City property tax bill for 2014 was \$450 (a little over 19%) more than my City tax bill for 2010, without any home improvements in the interim.

Are the increased taxes a bad thing? It depends on what we are getting for the extra taxes we are paying. Some increases may be justified — for example, if they are for new services desired by residents, more efficient equipment that will reduce costs over time, or increased salaries to attract and retain the best City employees.

The problem is that we do not know exactly what we are getting for the extra taxes we are paying. In order to justify tax increases to residents, City Council needs to know what budget items would be cut if we did not raise the effective property tax rate. This would require the City to prepare and present two budgets to City Council: the preferred budget and an amended budget showing the City's recommended reductions in expenditures if budgeted effective property taxes are not increased. City Council could then decide whether some or all of the additional expenditures are justified. This additional procedural step would let residents know the reasons for any tax increases.

I voted against the budget and tax increase this year because we could not provide the explanation that our residents deserve. This does not mean that I am against all tax and fee increases. I voted for an increase in garbage fees so that we can resume yard waste recycling for residents. That is an example of a tax/fee increase that is justified by a new service.

I am hopeful that next year our City Council will adopt this procedural change in our budgeting process so that we can justify any property tax increases to residents. My hope is that future City Councils will also adopt this change to increase accountability and transparency in budgeting and setting property tax rates.



Parks and Recreation



Park Lovers' Ball on February 13

The 25th annual Park Lovers' Ball will be held at the Omni Hotel on Saturday evening, February 13, beginning at 7 pm. Invitations will arrive in West U households in early January. Event Chairs Judy and Comfort Cheng and Michele and Paul Marvin invite you to be part of this popular West U gala that raises funds for our beautiful neighborhood parks.



As part of the 25th anniversary celebration, we will be honoring past chairs of the Park Lovers' Ball: Carol Burke (1992), Ginni Mithoff (1993), Gayle Jackson (1994), Linda Gray (1995), Beverly and Jack Loftis (1996), Kim and Reid Wilson (1997), Theresa Attwell and Kim Cooper (1998), Ann and Roger Martin (1999), Ayse and Grant McCracken (2000), Sherry Gift and Donna LaMond (2001), Maria Elena Herbst (2002), Cecilia Binig McCann (2003), Leah Ragiel (2004), David Klutts (2005), Diana Brown and Sue Hanna (2006), Penny and Drew Grams and Vicki and Dana Grams (2007), Diane Cain and Dorothy Kaldis (2008), Susan Garofolo and Nicholas Ro (2009), Jennifer Gatto, Daryl Hoover and Kara Samples (2010), Jennifer Debow and Amy Reeves (2011), Courtney and Scott Archer and Anne and John Freeman (2012), Kristine and Joaquin Martinez (2013), Megan and Drew Morris, Nancy Kate and Mark Prescott, and Kara and Dax Sanders (2014), and Michele and Charles Still, Adrienne and William Vanderbloemen, and Christi and John Young (2015).

Seats are still available, with table purchases starting at \$2,500 for a table for 10, and individual seats are \$250. If you have not already made your reservation to attend, please contact Friends Executive Director Donna LaMond at (713) 662-7430 or DLaMond@WestUTX.gov. You can also visit westuparks.org; reservations and payments can be taken care of online through the Friends website. There will be dinner and dancing, silent and live auctions, and the big board. The ball always has a few surprises in store for guests as well.

To volunteer to help with the gala or to become an underwriter or sponsor, please visit westuparks.org or contact Friends Executive Director Donna LaMond at (713) 662-7430 or DLaMond@WestUTX.gov. To donate an auction item, please contact Heather Curran at (713) 203-7305 or email her at heather.curran.kelly@gmail.com. The auction always has something for everyone, from trips and sporting outings, to jewelry for that special someone, to everything in between, including a special Fathers & Flashlights VIP package.

So, gather your friends and neighbors, and put together a table for the Park Lovers' Ball! Special thanks go to our underwriters and sponsors for the event.

Friends fundraising continues year-round with the stork program to announce the birth of a new baby, business and community partnerships, memorials and honorariums, pavers, benches and tree sales. For more information, please visit westuparks.org or call the Friends office at (713) 662-7430.



Special Events

Go Ahead, Take a Guess! Can you guess the number of eggs in the Di-Eggo Tower of Eggs?

Di-Eggo, the giant egg tower, has gone through a renovation, and in the process the number of eggs has changed too. Come check out the new tower at the West U Recreation Center starting on March 4, 2016. Take a guess how many eggs are in the Di-Eggo and you might just win a prize! To participate, pick up an entry form at the Customer Relations Desk at the Recreation Center, 4210 Bellaire Blvd. Participants must be residents of West U to be eligible for a prize.

Easter/Spring Festival and Arbor Day

The City of West University Place Parks and Recreation Department, on Saturday, March 19, 2016, will host an Easter/Spring Festival, featuring an “eggs-tra” special visit from the Easter Bunny and our very own Wally the Walrus swim lesson mascot. Also, in honor of Arbor Day, Craig Koehl, the City’s Urban Forester, will be on hand giving away trees — available to the first 30 residents. Admission to the event is complimentary, and activities are open to the whole family. Don’t forget to stop by the Recreation Center to guess how many eggs are inside Di-Eggo for the chance to win a great prize! Di-Eggo will be on display starting Friday, March 4. The winners will be announced during the Easter/Spring Festival.

Shakespeare in the Park

Houston Shakespeare Festival will perform a family-friendly, 80-minute version of Shakespeare’s comedy of love and magic in the forest, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, at 6:30 pm on Friday, March 25, 2016, on the lawn at Colonial Park, 4130 Byron. Bring your blanket and some great eats. It’s a “Picnic Theatre” evening for all ages!

Summer Camp Registration — Mark Your Calendars!

Summer will be here before you know it, and the West University Place Parks and Recreation Department has the perfect camp for every interest! Choose from Building Brains LEGO Camp, Dance Camp, iKids Camp, Tennis Camp, Kidventure, and more! Spaces are limited. Please visit www.westutx.gov/camps for a complete listing of camp descriptions, dates and times, or call (713) 662-7420 for more information.

Camp Registration Dates:

- **Priority Registration** (only 2015 Campers are eligible): begins Tuesday, January 26, and runs through Monday, February 1, 2016
- **Resident Registration:** begins Tuesday, February 2
- **Non-Resident Registration:** begins Thursday, February 4
- **Kidventure Camp:** please visit www.kidventure.com for more info

For more information on events and activities, please visit www.westutx.gov/events or phone the Parks and Recreation Department at (713) 662-7420.

Pet Etiquette

Good weather encourages us to enjoy the outdoors, often bringing our pets with us. Help your dog and our City stay safe by keeping your dog on a leash (or in a fenced yard) at all times. Besides being the law, using a leash prevents your dog from running into traffic or accosting other pets, and it keeps other people safe from unwelcome interactions with your dog. While out walking, also please be sure to clean up after your pet to avoid spreading disease and waste. West U residents are required to register their pets with the City’s Animal Control Officer. The cost is \$20 for a lifetime registration.

To register, bring a copy of the pet’s rabies vaccination papers to the Public Works Building, 3826 Amherst, and fill out the registration form available there. You will receive a tag to keep as proof of registration. Your pets should wear the tag, along with the rabies tag, on their collars to help Animal Control identify your pets should they leave your yard or become lost. Periodically make sure that all enclosures where your pets are kept are secure. For more information or to ask questions, please contact the Animal Control Officer at (713) 662-5831.

Lifeguard Certification Courses

Are you 15 or older and looking for a great summer job, after-school activity or challenging career in aquatics? Lifeguarding puts you in an exciting position, working as part of a team to help people safely enjoy the water. Lifeguarding also helps you develop skills and experiences that will be valued by colleges and future employers. Prior to taking the class, all participants must pass a prerequisite skills swimming test, which will be administered the first day. Three classes are offered, held from 8 am to 5 pm on Saturday and Sunday; the course weekends are April 9 – 10, May 14 – 15 or May 21 – 22. The price is \$175 for residents and \$195 for non-residents, plus a \$35 fee paid to the American Red Cross. For more information, please call the Recreation Center at (713) 662-7420 or visit www.westutx.gov/reg.

Now Hiring

The West University Recreation Center and Colonial Park Pool staff is now accepting applications for part-time seasonal recreation attendant, lifeguard and swim instructor positions. The Parks and Recreation Department offers the most competitive pay scale in the area, flexible schedules and a fun atmosphere! Certifications are necessary for some positions, and the ability to provide quality customer service is a must for all. Be part of a fantastic team! For more information, visit www.westutx.gov/application or call (713) 662-7420.

Safety and Public Works

Rapid Entry Systems

This article was originally published in the Fall 2015 issue of *City Currents*. Because of an overwhelmingly positive response to the Knox Box, we are running the article again.

What is a Knox Box?

The Knox Rapid Entry System is a secure emergency access program developed for property owners and first responders. The West University Place Fire Department has utilized the Knox Rapid Entry System for the past 15 years to prevent costly entry damage while protecting lives and property. Property owners store entrance keys and access cards in high-security Knox Boxes mounted near the building entrance to be utilized for emergency access. West U currently has 61 Knox Boxes installed within the City.

How does it work?

Residential or commercial property owners purchase a Knox Box and provide the keys to access the property. Once the Knox Box is installed, the Fire Department will come out to the property to place your keys in the box and lock it. To gain access during emergencies, each Fire Department response vehicle houses a Knox Master Key Retention Unit, which controls access to the master key that can open the Knox Box on your property.

Is it safe?

Yes. To release the master key, response personnel must make the request to Dispatch over the public safety radio system, identify themselves, give the address of the building to be accessed and provide a valid PIN code. Upon returning the master key to the Retention Unit, response personnel must announce over the radio system that the Knox Box and master key have been resecured. The Knox master key can only be accessed by Fire Department personnel.

How much does it cost?

Knox offers key boxes for both residential and commercial applications. Residential boxes start at \$159 and commercial boxes start at \$255. Please contact Fire Marshal James Novak at (713) 662-5837 to obtain a Knox Box Authorization order form.

The Knox Rapid Entry System is a secure emergency access program developed for property owners and first responders.



From The City of West University Place Police Department

The City of West University Place Police Department would like to remind residents of several ways they can assist the department in keeping themselves and their property safe throughout the New Year. The holiday season usually ends with bargain shopping and special sales in the months that follow. Crowded shopping malls and dimly lit parking lots are common areas where criminal activity takes place. Protect yourself by always trying to park as close to the store entrance as possible, and if doing so at night, make sure the area in which you park has adequate lighting. By eliminating these important elements of criminal opportunity, you increase a criminal's chances of being detected in the act of a crime and decrease the odds of becoming a victim. Additional safety practices include walking along with other people in the parking lot when returning to your car. There is safety in numbers, and criminals are more likely to select a victim who is alone rather than someone from a crowd.

Protecting your property is also very important. Protect your sale or other purchases by not leaving items visible in your vehicle while traveling from store to store. Secure items in your vehicle's trunk, or if possible, take them home before going to your next destination. And under no circumstances should you ever leave your purse or wallet unattended inside your vehicle.

To further protect your property, record the serial numbers of the valuable items in your home and/or mark them with an identifying number such as your driver's license or state-issued identification (ID) card number. Marking your property this way discourages theft and provides officers with the information needed to contact you should your property be recovered. When marking your valuables with your driver's license or ID number, include the state abbreviation (TX) before the number to let the officers know what type of number they are reading. Make the marking permanent by using an electric engraver, and always engrave your markings on a surface area not easily seen (on the bottom or back of an item).

The next step is to manually record each item's manufacturer's name, model number, serial number and any engravings you have made and where on the item you made them. On items that cannot be marked, it is suggested that you photograph and/or video the items for future identifying purposes.

Follow these instructions for all valuable property you wish to protect. Keep your inventory list in a safe and accessible location. Quickly providing this information to responding officers will greatly enhance the possibility of recovering your property should you become victim of a burglary or theft.

Assist the West University Place Police Department in making our community safer by **REPORTING IMMEDIATELY** any suspicious activity to (713) 668-0330, or in the case of an emergency, dial 911.

Frequently Asked Questions about Low-Hanging Vegetation and Sight Obstructions

Minimum Road Clearance

13' 6"
(no vegetation)

Why does the vegetation over the roadway need to be maintained at a minimum height of 13 feet 16 inches?

Most would answer it's because the City requires it. While this is true, the required height ensures adequate clearance for all types of vehicles that perform essential City services (fire trucks, ambulances, garbage trucks and street sweepers) or vehicles like moving vans simply passing through.

What happens if a vehicle is damaged by low-hanging vegetation?

Depending on the cause and how it happened, the property owner may be responsible for damages caused to vehicles by low-hanging tree limbs and/or vegetation over the roadway.

How tall is 13 feet 16 inches?

This is a good rule of thumb: If the limbs or branches from your tree extend past the curb below the height of the streetlights located along your street, then chances are they need to be trimmed. The top of the streetlight is approximately 15 feet above the street.

obstructed regulatory sign



What is considered a sight obstruction to regulatory signs?

A sight obstruction is considered to be anything that obstructs the full view of any regulatory sign (stop sign, speed limit sign, signs for a school or park zone, etc.) to the motoring public from a distance approximately 150 – 200

feet away. In an urban setting such as West U, vegetation along the right of way is usually the cause of such an obstruction.

How do I know if my vegetation is causing a sign obstruction?

This is a good rule of thumb when deciding if vegetation needs to be trimmed: If the full sign cannot be seen from three to four property lots away (approx. 150 – 200 feet), then the vegetation needs to be trimmed.

Winter is a good time to look at the trees and vegetation around your property, so you can schedule the necessary trimming before spring.

If you have any questions concerning road clearance or sight obstructions, please contact the West U Public Works Department Traffic Control at (713) 662-5839.

Beginning January 2016 City Will Begin Weekly Curbside Bulk Trash Collection

As part of our commitment to improve service, the City of West U will begin weekly bulk trash collection starting January 2016. Bulk trash will be collected on Thursday and Friday each week (this will coincide with your Thursday or Friday scheduled trash day). This service will provide a more convenient way for residents to discard those items that are not typical household trash and may not fit in a bag. Please note that limitations will apply (i.e., no mattresses, large furniture items, construction debris, etc.). Also note that the City will no longer host the heavy trash day event. Electronic recycling (e-waste) and mattresses will now be collected during the City's free shredding events, typically held the first Saturday in May and November. Look for more information in the coming months, or go to our website at www.westutx.gov/bulktrash for more details.

Curbside Yard Waste Recycling to Resume in 2016

The City Council, during its annual City Budget process, approved a recommendation by the Recycling and Solid Waste Reduction Board ("Board") and City staff to resume the separate curbside yard waste recycling program ("green waste recycling") which was stopped in 2006. Between 1990 and 2006, the City collected yard waste curbside and delivered it to a composting/mulch company. This service was discontinued in May 2006 after the City's composter sold their property and there was no other composter located close enough to the City to allow for separate yard waste curbside recycling. The City was one of the first in Texas to collect yard waste separately from trash and require the use of paper bags.

The City's current recycling/diversion rate is approximately 24% and has remained relatively flat over the last 8 years. The recycling/diversion rate is the percentage of material that the City diverts from landfills. It is estimated that yard waste makes up almost 25% of our trash that goes to the landfill. Once green waste recycling is implemented, the recycling/diversion rate is expected to increase to 40 to 45%, making it one of the State's highest rate for a municipality. The national recycling/diversion rate average is 34%.

In order to recycle yard waste, the composter requires the City residents to use compostable bags. Two types of bags are available to use — the paper lawn bag (like the City required in the previous program) or the plastic compostable bag. The Board has recommended that the City use the paper lawn bags (but residents can also use the plastic compostable bag if they so desire). The reason for this recommendation is that the paper lawn bags continue to be used by many of the City's residents and cost less than the plastic compostable bags. City staff is working with the Board on the rules and regulations relating to the curbside yard waste recycling program. The curbside yard waste recycling program should resume again sometime in 2016.

There will be a slight increase in the resident's garbage bill related to yard waste recycling based on the increased costs for staffing and transportation costs. The Board believes the increased monthly cost is small when compared to the benefits derived from recycling yard waste, reducing the use of landfills and making the City a leader again in recycling.

City Currents

A Newsletter for the citizens of
City of West University Place

Winter 2016



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Design by Minor Design



NASA Explains Why You Should Live on a Tree-Lined Street — and in a Tree-Lined City

Just get more trees in your life.

A new NASA study shows that trees and plant life are essential for keeping our cities cool, and it's not just because they're nice to sit under on a sunny day. Cities are like giant heat storage units because of what NASA calls their "impervious surfaces" — roads, buildings, concrete. The heat these surfaces soak up causes what's known as the "urban heat island effect," where a city's temperature is a few degrees hotter than that of the surrounding countryside, thanks to the heat retention of city infrastructure. But the new study shows that the amount of green space in the city has a big effect on just how hot our urban heat islands get.

"Everybody thinks, 'urban heat island, things heat up.' But it's not as simple as that," said research scientist Kurtis Thome, co-author of the paper. "The amount and type of vegetation in a city plays a big role in how much the urbanization changes the temperature." What the team found is that trees and other vegetation are essential for keeping our cities cool. Trees naturally cool the air by a process called evapotranspiration. It's a process plants undergo that's a little similar to sweating in that released water vapor carries off heat.

In their model, based on the observation of real cities using satellite and temperature data, the researchers found that when the area of a city's impervious surfaces reaches 35% of the total (the other 65% being vegetation cover), things go haywire. Up until that point, the urban area stays at a constant 1.3°C above the surrounding area temperature. That difference increases as the vegetation is stripped away, "reaching 1.6°C warmer with 65% urbanization." That might not sound like much, but one degree is enough to increase air-conditioning use by up to 20%.

Noteworthy is the fact that fancier, tree-lined neighborhoods with gardens and well-tended lawns can be a couple of degrees cooler than less wooded urban areas. The effect is so strong that in cities built in the desert, "the urban area actually has a cooling effect, because of irrigated lawns and trees, that wouldn't be there without the city."

As our cities grow, and green spaces are replaced with more impervious surfaces, their temperatures rise too. The answer is pretty straightforward: more trees and plants means cooler cities. And more trees also means a more pleasant city environment for those living there. We just have to figure out how to build cities and plant trees at the same time.